

# The Design of RPGs to Teach Ethics and Empathy

Dr. Karen Schrier

Marist College

[kschrier@gmail.com](mailto:kschrier@gmail.com)

# “Ethics, Games and Education” – What Does it Mean to You?

1. Teaching kids how to behave appropriately in games (e.g., no cyberbullying or harassment)
2. Helping kids find ethical games, without sex and violence
3. Keeping kids healthy while playing games (avoiding addiction, obesity, aggression)
4. All of the above
5. None of the above



Can we use games to practice  
ethical thinking?

Can games help us understand  
our own ethics, and become more  
ethically literate?

Can games give us insight into  
what it means to be human?

We need to look beyond whether games are inherently good or bad, and instead think about how games might foster thinking about one's own, another's or society's ethics.

How Many of You Have Played a  
Game with an Ethical Component  
or Ethical Dilemmas?



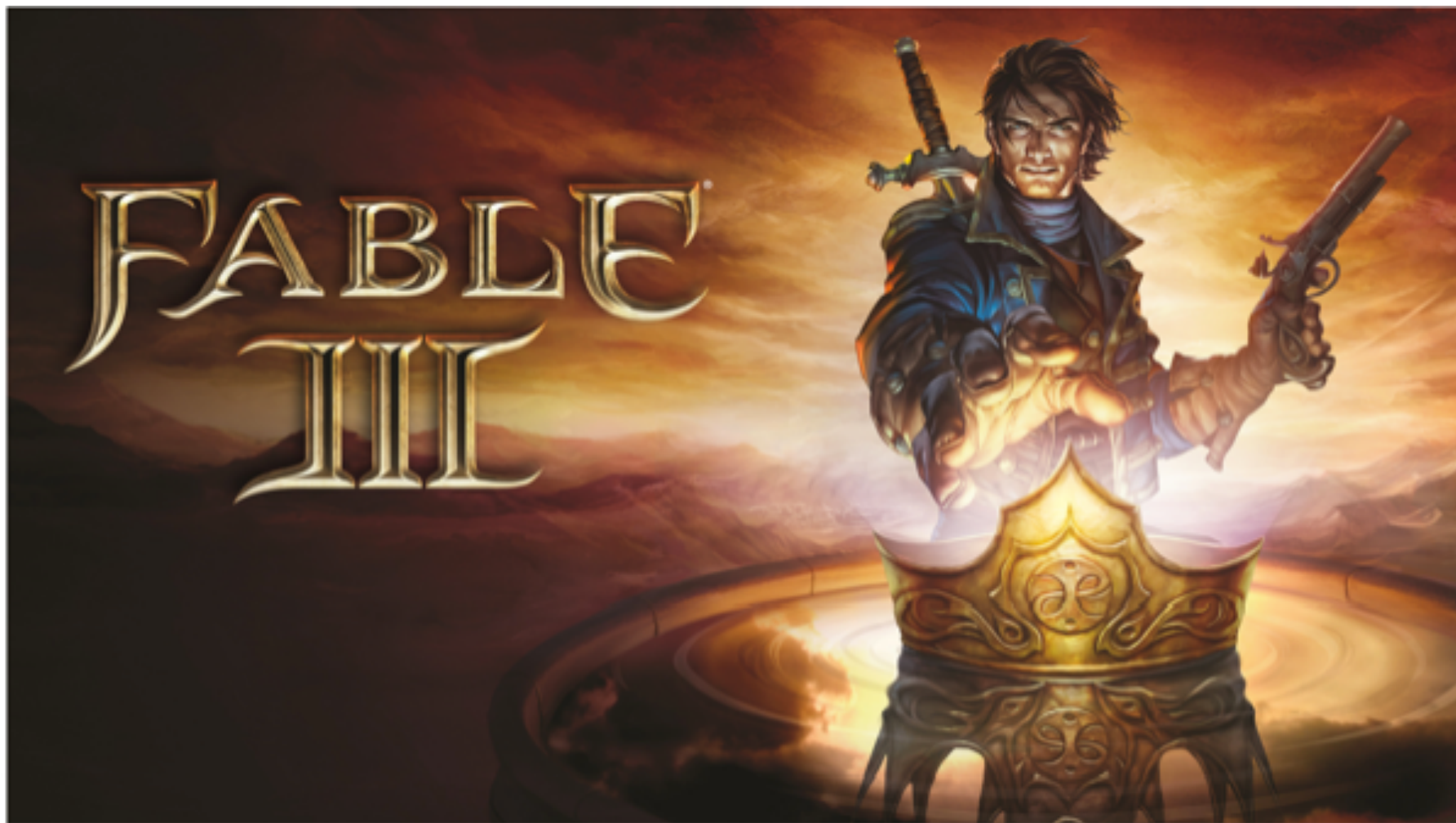


## Fallout 3 Karma Affecting Actions

Action	Karma Consequence
Kill a Very Evil Character	+100
Kill an Evil Character	—
Murder a Neutral/Good Creature	-25
Murder a Neutral/Good Character	-100
Steal from a Neutral/Good Character	-5 (per item)
Donate caps to a church	+(x) (Depends on amount)
Do something good in Freeform Quests	+50 Karma or more
Do something evil in Freeform Quests	-50 Karma or more



# *Fable III: A Role Playing Game* (RPG)



[http://www.youtube.com/  
watch?v=5-ijti0z0JI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5-ijti0z0JI)

# Ethical Thinking in *Fable III*

Control Condition	Experimental Condition 1	Experimental Condition 2
10 participants	10 participants	10 participants
Interacted with written ethical scenarios	Played <i>Fable III</i> as a male avatar	Played <i>Fable III</i> as a female avatar

# Coding Scheme of Ethical Thinking Skills and Thought Processes

Reasoning-Related	Reflection-Related	Empathy-Related	Information Gathering-Related
Identify pros and cons	Consideration of past events in game/ scenarios	Perspective-taking/ consider someone's perspective	Querying real people
Consideration of consequences	Reflection on one's decision after it was made	Consider another's emotions/ feelings	Querying characters

# *Findings*

- *Few differences between the control and experimental conditions*
  - *Few avatar gender differences*
  - *No suggested connection between using reasoning and empathy skills*
  - *Participants practiced A LOT of skills and thought processes in the game!*
- 
- *What does this imply about in-game versus written ethical dilemmas?*
  - *What does this imply about avatar-player identification?*

# *Anecdotal Findings*

- *Relationships, and empathy, seemed to build over time with NPCs*
- *People cared about the NPCs*
- *Hard to make “bad” decisions*
- *When they made bad decisions, taxes and environment were the first to be affected*
- *Harder to make bad decisions in front of other townspeople NPCs, rather than just the advisor*
- *Consequences needed to be effective, otherwise there was no pressure to decide*
- *Participants play through multiple times to experiment.*
- *Can games give us insight into our societal values?*
- *Can we use games to learn about human behavior?*

# How Do We Best Design and Integrate Games Into the Classroom—Particularly for Ethics Education?



# Design Principles

- 1. Design characters players can care about and can build relationships with over time.*

*Allow enough time for students to empathize with the characters.*

# Design Principles

*2. Consequences and context should matter.*

*There should be meaningful consequences within the game that motivate the student to practice ethical thinking.*

# Design Principles

*3. A social element is important, even if it's "implied."*

*Support safe collaboration, community and the exchange of ideas and perspectives, among students and NPCs, both within the game, and within the classroom.*

# Design Principles

*4. Allow players to experiment with diverse and authentic choices, possibilities, identities and statuses.*

*Do not just show the “good” side but enable students to try on alternate ethical systems, so long as it does not direly and negatively affect other classmates or themselves.*

# Design Principles

*5. Even if the scenarios are not entirely realistic and authentic, how players behave in it may give us insight into ethics.*

*Don't forget to incorporate ways to measure this, and to allow students to reflect on it afterward.*

# Design Principles

*6. Make transparent any design assumptions.*

*Ask students to consider what would have happened if the game was designed differently, after all, this is not the only way the game could have been designed.*

PREMIER REFERENCE SOURCE

# ETHICS AND GAME DESIGN

Teaching Values through Play



Karen Schrier & David Gibson

PREMIER REFERENCE SOURCE

# Designing Games for Ethics

Models, Techniques and Frameworks



KAREN SCHRIER & DAVID GIBSON

kschrier@gmail.com

*As we delve deeper into the field of ethics and games, it ultimately invites us to reevaluate what it means to be human and gain insight into our own humanity.*

*Through games, and play, we are seeking new ways to experience the world, to understand humankind, to reflect on our identities, our destinies, our pasts, and our mysteries*